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ABSTRACT

The first of two articles in this report offers a survey of how community ties lead to various psychological needs that are the motivation for newspaper reading. It identifies three distinct audience segments: the traditional audience, with permanent bonds to the community, whose need for information, guidance, and community surveillance leads to the reading of hard news, editorials, and background features; the more mobile readers, less tied to the community, who use the newspaper for entertainment and as a guide to leisure opportunities; and the peripheral readers, with few contacts to the community, who use the newspaper to maintain vicarious links with the community and to fill time that is not taken up by demands of family, job, and community activities. The second article reviews the origins of precision journalism (the use of social science research methods by editors and reporters), offers examples of past and future applications in the newsroom, and outlines ways that any newspaper can begin using these reporting techniques. (Author/FL)

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American Newspaper Publishers Association

ANPA NEWS RESEARCH REPORT

FROM THE ANPA NEWS RESEARCH CENTER No. 18 March 9, 1979

A REPORT FOR EDITORS PROVIDED IN COORDINATION WITH THE NEWSPAPER READERSHIP COUNCIL

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Newspaper Readership and Community Ties

By Robert L. Stevenson

HIGHLIGHTS: This survey looks at how community ties lead to various psychological needs which are the motivations for newspaper reading. Three distinct audience segments are identified:

- the traditional newspaper audience, with strong, permanent bonds to the community, whose need for information, guidance and community surveillance leads to reading hard news, editorials and background features
- more mobile readers, less tied to the community, who use the newspaper for entertainment and as a guide to leisure opportunities
- peripheral readers, with few contacts to the community, who use the newspaper to maintain vicarious links with the community and to fill time which is not taken up by demands of family, job and community activities.

and

Precision Journalism: Coming of Age

By Arnold H. Ismach

HIGHLIGHTS: Precision journalism—the use of social science research methods by editors and reporters—includes a wide spectrum of activity. This article reviews the origins of precision journalism, offers examples of past and future applications in the newsroom and outlines how any newspaper can begin using these reporting techniques.

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Newspaper Readership and Community Ties

By Robert L. Stevenson

This project was conducted under a grant from the ANPA News Research Center to Stevenson and Jane D. Brown, both assistant professors of journalism at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Fieldwork for the survey was handled by Knight Publishing Co., Charlotte, N.C., under the direction of Michael Kleibrink, director of marketing research, who also contributed to the design of the project.

Most studies of newspaper readership have been largely descriptive: who reads what? While useful, such an approach does not focus directly on the important question of *why* some people read certain parts of the newspaper while others ignore those parts in favor of other content. And it does not explain why some people ignore the local newspaper entirely.

Newspaper reading—like television viewing and radio listening—is a routine part of most people's lives. And while the habit of newspaper reading often is acquired early in life, changes can occur later.

Most of the recent ANPA studies begin with an assumption that media use is related to a set of psychological needs that reading satisfies. We read a newspaper, of course, for the news, but newspapers also serve as entertainment for some people; others use the newspaper to keep in touch with the community; and for some, the newspaper is a convenient way to pass time. In this study, we look at various kinds of ties to the community—home, work, neighborhood and leisure—which seem to produce the psychological needs which in turn lead people to seek out specific parts of the newspaper.

The study, a telephone survey of adults in the Charlotte, N.C., metropolitan area, found that while regular newspaper readership is largely a function of experience with the newspaper as a child, changes do occur among a minority. For this small group, somewhat more are likely to stop rather than start reading newspapers. However, many non-readers are willing to give the newspaper another try when they move to a new city or when problems with circulation service or content are solved.

Three broad reader segments were identified.

- The heart of the newspaper audience continues to be people with strong and permanent ties to the community who look for information and guidance to use in maintaining civic links. Such people are heavy consumers of traditional news, opinion and background features.

- Other readers, often young and mobile, have few permanent ties to the community and more interest in using the newspaper as entertainment and as a means of maintaining casual surveillance of those aspects of the community which are of interest. This group responds well to some of the new entertainment and lifestyle features.

- A third segment is made up of people, often old, who use the newspaper to maintain vicarious ties to the community and simply to fill time in a life that contains few other demands. These people frequently are the heaviest readers of some of the traditional features like social news and religion.

Methodology

Data were collected in telephone interviews with 499 adults randomly selected in the metropolitan area of Charlotte, N.C. Telephone numbers were generated by a random digit dialing technique, and respondents were selected within each household by a random technique, as well. The interviewing was done in May 1978. The survey was carried out by the School of Journalism, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, with the cooperation of Knight Publishing Co., publishers of The Charlotte Observer and The Charlotte News.

Past and Present Readership

In a previous study (ANPA News Research Report No. 7, "The Frequency of Newspaper Readership," Oct. 21, 1977), we concluded that media use "seems to be largely a habit learned early in life." In this study we looked at the shifts in readership over time. Current regular readers were asked if they had ever stopped reading and why they later resumed. Non-regular readers were asked if they had ever been regular readers and why they had stopped.

The largest part of the sample (71 percent) were—and continue to be—regular readers, while only 8 percent have always been non-readers. The remaining 21 percent of the sample were people who changed at some time in the past. Eight percent changed from non-reader to reader, but 13 percent of the sample were readers who dropped out.

This 13 percent were asked why they had stopped reading:

- 35 percent Lack of time or convenience
- 15 percent Circulation problems
- 15 percent Change of location
- 13 percent Dissatisfaction with content of newspaper
- 8 percent Loss of health, sight
- 14 percent Other reasons or no answer

The even smaller number (8 percent) of gained readers were asked why they had begun to read regularly:

- 37 percent Change of location
- 14 percent Circulation improvement
- 11 percent More time available
- 6 percent Content improved
- 6 percent Health or sight improved
- 26 percent Other reasons or no answer

These percentages illustrate the familiar problems of circulation service and competition with other activities. But *they also demonstrate a reassuring willingness of non-readers to give a newspaper in a new community a chance or to give existing newspapers a second chance when circulation service or content improves.*

This study emphasizes again the importance of reliable delivery service. Earlier ANPA studies showed that dissatisfaction with delivery service was the most common reason for stopping a newspaper subscription. Even though newspaper reading is a casual activity which most people take for granted, it is psychologically important. When people set aside definite periods of time during the day for reading—such as at breakfast or as a break late in the afternoon—they expect the newspaper to be available when they want it. If the newspaper is routinely late or does not show up at all, it does not take people long to find other activities to substitute for newspaper reading.

Because of the importance of acquiring the newspaper habit early in life, the 63 percent of the respondents who said they remembered reading a newspaper as a child were asked what parts they read when they were young. Almost three out of four (71 percent) mentioned comics; sports and news were far less frequently cited but were about equal in attraction (22 percent to 21 percent); 23 percent mentioned other features or kinds of content.

The importance of these three types of content appealing to youth—comics, sports and news—is clear, both as an incentive to readership now and as a means of developing the readership habit for the future.

Motivation for Reading

While some of the gratifications derived from newspaper reading are obvious—learning about public affairs, for example—some are not so readily identified. Early studies during newspaper strikes found that many readers missed their newspaper because it was a companion, a way to fill empty time and a means of imposing regularity on their lives. Other media, of course, compete with newspapers to provide these same gratifications, and different people use a different mix of media to satisfy a wide range of psychological needs.

The Charlotte residents were given a list of reasons for reading newspapers and asked whether each reason was very important, somewhat important or not at all important to them. The proportions who said each need was *very important* were:

- 69 percent To keep up with the news
- 50 percent To keep in touch with the community
- 45 percent To help in decisions like voting
- 23 percent For entertainment
- 17 percent To have something to talk about with others
- 9 percent To pass the time of day
- 5 percent To plan what to do each day

A study in Seattle (ANPA News Research Report No. 6, "Newspaper Use Among New Residents," Oct. 5, 1977) looked at media use in relation to "life space," the immediate social environment composed of home, neighborhood, community, work and leisure. In this survey, we looked at how the components of life space generate the diverse psychological needs that newspaper reading can satisfy.

We also looked at the connections between life space and what we call "community engagement," a broad term that encompasses the ties between individuals and their life space. Community engagement, of course, is closely related to age. As people enter responsible adulthood and acquire families, homes and permanent jobs, their ties to the community increase. And at that time we assume that their use of the newspaper both increases and changes. In a similar way, community engagement decreases as children mature and leave home, and as people retire from work and active involvement in neighborhood affairs. At that point, too, we expect newspaper use to diminish somewhat and to change as people become less of an active participant in their community and more of an indirect observer.

It is clear that the newspaper is different things to different people (see table). It also is clear that the newspaper continues to be, above all, a *news*paper, a source of information and community ties that serves the needs of a broad spectrum of the public. *The information function of the newspaper serves people with strong involvement with the community, people who expect to remain in the community and people who are interested in and involved in the community and nation. It is this audience segment that is and will continue to be the major component of the newspaper audience.*

But not everyone is actively engaged in community affairs, and not everyone looks to the newspaper as a source of information and a mechanism for maintaining community ties. The entertainment function of the newspaper is again demonstrated in these interviews. It is important to note that the people who do not use the newspaper to gratify news needs are most likely to use it for entertainment. *Entertainment-oriented readers are important to newspapers because they*

Table

Percentage of Survey Respondents Citing Each Reason for Reading Newspapers as "Very Important"

	Keep up with the news	Help in decisions like voting	Keep in touch with the community	Entertainment	Plan what to do each day	Have something to talk about with others	Pass the time
Community Affairs							
Voting in local elections							
Almost always	75	57	58	24	4	18	11
Occasionally	69	41	53	25	7	16	6
Seldom	59	32	36	23	7	17	6
Interest in local politics							
Very	83	57	63	31	6	21	9
Somewhat	69	47	51	20	4	15	8
Not very, not at all	57	32	40	21	6	18	9
Time away from home yesterday for leisure							
Yes	80	60	70	40	10	32	15
No	68	43	49	18	4	12	8
Expect to be here next year?							
Yes	70	46	51	23	4	17	9
No	53	29	53	35	24	29	0
Expect to be here in five years?							
Yes	70	44	52	21	4	18	10
No	56	46	41	36	10	15	3
National politics							
Voting in national elections							
Almost always	74	54	55	24	4	17	9
Occasionally	64	43	53	17	6	15	9
Seldom	60	25	35	26	9	20	8
Interest in national politics							
Very	83	58	57	29	5	19	9
Somewhat	66	46	50	19	4	17	8
Not very, not at all	53	25	41	23	5	15	9
Early newspaper use							
Newspaper in home as child							
Yes	71	51	54	25	4	16	7
No	64	30	39	18	7	21	12
Read newspaper as child							
Yes	73	51	55	26	4	16	8
No	51	49	46	13	5	26	3
Used newspaper in school							
Yes	70	52	54	27	5	18	9
No	68	37	47	18	5	17	9
Personal							
Married	68	48	51	20	4	17	7
Single	70	41	49	29	7	18	12
Job satisfaction							
Very satisfied	68	46	48	26	4	17	6
Somewhat	71	49	51	21	3	18	4
Not very, not at all	56	63	38	38	6	25	19

Note on interpretation: 75 percent of the survey respondents who almost always vote in local elections also cite "keeping up with the news" as a very important reason for reading the newspaper. In contrast, only 59 percent of those who seldom vote in local elections cite this reason for reading the newspaper as "very important" to them.

represent the best opportunity to expand readership. People already tied into the community are already regular readers for the most part, but the people who use the newspaper for entertainment often are not. But they can be attracted to the newspaper with a careful blend of material suited to their needs.

The newspaper is more than information and entertainment even though these are the major uses of the daily newspaper. *The newspaper is for some people a way to organize their life, a way to pass time, a source of information for small talk. These functions serve a relatively small but diverse audience segment.* For the elderly without strong personal ties to the community, the newspaper can be a surrogate, maintaining links that were once held by job, family and community activities. For such people, the newspaper can also be used to pass time and regulate life, providing the same psychological satisfactions that once were taken care of by the demands of family and community.

In a curious way, these individuals who are isolated from the community by a lack of engagement with it are similar to some young people—young people who are not well-educated or affluent, not interested in the newspaper as entertainment or as a catalog of leisure-time opportunities. Instead, these young people have few interests in either the news or entertainment content of the newspaper and tend to use it, like many elderly, to maintain tenuous and passive ties to the community and to fill time for which community responsibilities and leisure activities do not compete. They, more than any other group, are where newspaper readership has suffered, not from competition from television but from a lack of interest in or ties to the immediate community. If newspapers can expect youthful entertainment-oriented readers to shift their use of the newspaper to regular readership of traditional news as they develop stronger ties to the community, they cannot expect the same of this isolated youth segment made up of people whose limited, casual use of all media is not likely to increase or to evolve into regular newspaper readership.

Media Use and Readership

The psychological needs which newspaper reading gratifies and the individual and social factors which produce them are of interest, of course, mainly because they lead to differences in newspaper reading—differences which editors and publishers can use to produce an editorial package that can maximize readership among all of the diverse groups which make up the potential newspaper audience in a large community.

Instead of asking about readership of specific news stories or categories of news—national affairs, sports, etc.—we tried to define different packages of news and features that editors could put together to appeal to specific readership segments. Some of the packages are familiar—brief summaries of national and world events, background and interpretation, opinions and opposing viewpoints. But others are typical of the new, expanded editorial packages that many newspapers are using successfully to reach new readers, packages that could be presented as special sections or pages on personal finance, health, recreation and so on.

Respondents were told: *"Here is a list of different kinds of articles that appear in the newspaper. Using a 10-point scale where 10 represents the highest possible interest and one represents the lowest possible interest, tell me how interested you are in reading each of these."*

From previous experience with the scale, we can classify as likely readers those people who rate a particular editorial item nine or 10. The proportion of metropolitan Charlotte residents likely to read the various packages are:

- **36 percent** National and world news summaries—a quick rundown of the most important news events reported in this country and other parts of the world
- **35 percent** Interesting people—stories about unusual people and their activities, including historical features, daily life in different parts of the world and interesting aspects of the local community
- **34 percent** Medical advice columns, exercise tips, a guide to finding health care services and stories on health problems
- **32 percent** Where to find different types of merchandise, a guide to outlet stores, tips on where to get the best service on repairs and evaluation of merchandise carried by local merchants
- **24 percent** Local news summaries—a short listing of police and fire calls, court cases and brief summaries of what local government agencies are doing
- **24 percent** Information on the latest sporting events, including scores and stories about sports personalities
- **21 percent** News about today's living, fashions, personal-advice columns and social events
- **19 percent** Information on various types of do-it-yourself projects including home decorating, hobbies, auto and household repair
- **19 percent** Topics on when to plant and how to care for your lawn and garden
- **18 percent** Stories on how people manage their money, how to save and how people in the area spend their money
- **18 percent** Stories about local religious activities and personalities plus information on various types of religion
- **17 percent** Stories about local recreational sports leagues, children's sports and other recreational activities

- 16 percent — Stories about local entertainment, personalities and places to go, and a calendar of events
- 14 percent — Longer stories covering the background of major issues in the news, the people involved and a broad perspective on why these issues are important
- 12 percent — Stories presenting different viewpoints about important issues and arguments for and against different sides
- 2 percent — Stories about activities of local garden, bridge, civic and other social clubs

The reading interests of our respondents reinforce earlier findings about the importance of news in the newspaper. But "news" also includes feature material. The blend of hard news and human interest features developed over the years continues to serve readers well. Most of the newer content packages listed above rate moderate or low readership (medical news is an obvious exception). Of course, they can appeal to small but important audience segments and can help bring marginal readers into the newspaper's regular audience.

This survey also highlights the information and entertainment value of advertising. The newspaper's commercial information—advertising and editorial content about goods and services available in the community—is an important bridge uniting the three audience segments. Both advertising and consumer-oriented editorial matter rate high among most subgroups of readers. In addition, stories about consumer goods and services—the kind of material to which many newspapers are now giving extra emphasis—appeal particularly to the casual reader who uses the newspaper for entertainment and to pass time.

Implications

The use of newspapers is largely a practice learned in childhood, but changes do take place later in life. Unfortunately for newspapers, the gain in readers from the ranks of non-readers is offset by the loss of once-regular readers. However, the loss is not irreversible. Lost readers show an encouraging willingness to give newspapers a second chance when they move to a new city or when dissatisfaction with a newspaper's circulation or content is eliminated. The steady flow of new arrivals into most metropolitan areas is an important source of potential new readers. Also important are former subscribers who might be responsive to a newspaper's efforts to improve circulation and content.

It can be seen from this study that the stable segment of the community—those with the most secure ties to it—are the heart of the newspaper audience. Their community ties motivate them to use the newspaper for information, for political guidance and for surveillance of the social environment. And these needs, in turn, lead to a heavy readership of the newspaper's traditional hard news, editorials and background. Newspapers can strengthen their service to this important segment of their reading audience by improving the quality of their news coverage.

But newspapers are—and always have been—sources of entertainment, as well. And this study suggests that the readers who seek out the newspaper as entertainment are often quite different kinds of people. They typically have neither the ties nor the commitment to the community. But they are interested in entertainment, shopping and other opportunities in the community, and their reading interests reflect this. It is this audience segment to which newspapers can profitably direct lifestyle sections and other new content packages.

The third set of needs which motivate people to seek out the newspaper is less-related to the newspaper's content than to its use to pass time, to plan activities and to prepare for small talk. Their reading interests are diverse and in some cases shared with other segments. But they are also above average in some of the content areas which have not been given a fresh look in many newspapers—religion, social news and food. It is possible that special attention to these parts of the newspaper could improve circulation among this hard-to-reach segment of the population. ■

Precision Journalism: Coming of Age

By Arnold H. Ismach

Ismach is an associate professor and chairman of the news-editorial program at the School of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Minnesota. He was a reporter and editor on newspapers in Washington and southern California for 15 years before entering journalism education.

Each October, the Japanese celebrate a holiday that hasn't yet gained a foothold in the United States: Statistics Day. There are probably no other people in the world with a greater passion for statistics than the Japanese. But if Americans aren't yet ready to declare a national holiday in honor of numbers, there are signs of a developing romance.

Since World War II, government, business and education have been producing an avalanche of statistics, the product of a research explosion made possible by the advent of the electronic computer. One outlet for this profusion of numbers, as it is for most other social phenomena, is the press. But until the 1970s, the news media themselves didn't contribute much to the research stockpile. That's beginning to change.

The research goes by the name of "precision journalism"—the use of social science research methods by reporters—and it includes a broad landscape of inquiry. Studies have ranged from simple voter preference polls to sophisticated sociological and psychological surveys and field experiments. Some news organizations have developed their own trained staffs to conduct local studies. Others have relied on academic researchers for guidance or employed commercial organizations.

Survey research, of course, isn't a totally new venture for the press. The first recorded pre-election polling was conducted by newspapers in the presidential campaign of 1824.[1] Some newspapers have dabbled for decades in "man-on-the-street" and straw polls—and some still do. But newsroom research efforts today generally go far beyond those activities in sophistication and significance. What prompted the sudden growth of precision journalism in a business whose practitioners pride themselves on being "word people," not numbers merchants?

As with most change, there is probably an array of reasons. One of the most basic is the advent of high-speed computing, making possible the quick processing of large amounts of information. Another is need—journalists find themselves confronted with an increasingly complex society, one which doesn't yield easily to traditional reporting methods. Questions are being asked for which conventional sources don't have answers, despite the awesome output of research findings from most sectors of society. Often, the answers come too late for the time-frame of journalism. If the press is to provide answers, it has to develop data on its own.

The catalyst for precision journalism was a reporter with the Washington Bureau of Knight Newspapers. Philip Meyer had studied quantitative research methods at Harvard University under a Nieman Fellowship, an interest prompted by unsuccessful attempts to predict election results in Ohio in 1962 and 1964.

Meyer established the modern bench mark for in-house research by news organizations in 1967. Shortly after the ghetto riots in Detroit that year, he persuaded his editors that a study of the attitudes of the rioters might be revealing. With funding from the Detroit Urban League and technical assistance from the University of Michigan, Meyer put together a research team. A month later, the survey findings were in print. They indicated that, contrary to conventional wisdom, riot behavior was not the product of low education and income. Meyer went on from there to conduct a number of studies for the Knight newspapers, and in 1973 he published a book, *Precision Journalism*, which served as both guide and incentive for others.

Spurred by Meyer's pioneer work, journalism educators picked up the cue. Dr. Maxwell E. McCombs introduced precision journalism into reporting courses at the University of North Carolina in the early 1970s, and later at Syracuse University. The author of this article first offered a course in research methods for reporters in 1974 at the University of Minnesota. Since then, other major journalism schools have joined the movement. There also have been numerous workshops and seminars for working journalists.

The product of all this activity is seen with increasing frequency on the front pages of American newspapers, large and small. The Knight-Ridder newspapers, still guided by Meyer's expertise, are among the most heavily involve in news research projects, So are the Minneapolis Star and Tribune, where the Minnesota Poll has been a standard feature since the 1950s, and other special studies are conducted frequently. The Chicago Tribune, The Washington Post, the Milwaukee Journal and Sentinel, Los Angeles Times, The New York Times, The Toronto Star, the Des Moines (Iowa) Register and Tribune, The Charlotte (N.C.) Observer, the Richmond (Va.) Times-Dispatch, the Akron (Ohio) Beacon Journal and the Wilmington (Del.) News-Journal are among dozens of large news organizations that have made major commitments to precision journalism.

It's not exclusively an indulgence of metropolitan newspapers, either. A number of medium-sized and small dailies are involved in precision news research, some on a regular basis. One of the most active in the field has been the Dubuque (Iowa) Telegraph Herald. Others include the Davenport (Iowa) Quad-City Times,

the Roanoke (Va.) Times & World-News and the Van Nuys (Calif.) News.

Both principal wire services also are producing survey-based stories, as are the major weekly news magazines and all three television networks. Not surprisingly, a growing number of college dailies and even high school newspapers are conducting polls and special studies.

Examples of Studies

Many of the projects undertaken are virtual carbon copies of syndicated opinion polls conducted by organizations such as Gallup and Harris. Newspapers thus obtain local comparisons to national sentiment or attempt to measure opinion on purely local issues. But some precision journalism studies go far beyond the simple, and often trivial, one-shot opinion polls.

- The Milwaukee Journal, with the help of a branch of the University of Wisconsin, has published dozens of studies on subjects such as school desegregation attitudes and the experiences of burglary and robbery victims.
- The Philadelphia Inquirer, skeptical of claims by a district attorney that lenient judges were letting criminals go free, examined about 1,000 criminal case records. The computer-generated content analysis showed that failures in the procesutor's office were to blame, rather than lenient judges. It also showed that justice was a sometime thing in Philadelphia.
- The Minneapolis Star surveyed delegates to a political party nominating convention, gaining an accurate advance assessment of issues and candidate preferences. The Star also sampled voters on the night of a municipal election and had a story in the next evening's newspaper describing the factors that led to the election outcome. The Minneapolis Tribune achieved roughly the same goal with a 25-precinct model of the city.
- A New York Times survey after the 1976 presidential election concluded that a feeling of powerlessness, not disaffection with government, was the major cause of non-voting.
- The Dubuque Telegraph Herald questioned a sample of doctors in rural Iowa and developed a startling profile of an aging, overworked medical force.
- The Milwaukee Sentinel asked residents what they wanted in the way of medical care and health insurance, providing a useful set of priorities for policy planners.
- The Chicago Tribune, through a sample survey, discovered what metropolitan residents thought about the quality of life in their communities.
- The Washington Post, in cooperation with researchers at Harvard University, compared the perceptions of the public to those of organizational leaders on questions of equality and found wide disparities.
- The Roanoke Times & World-News employed a computer to probe the sources of election campaign contributions.
- The Richmond Times-Dispatch analyzed the likelihood of commuters' making greater use of bus transit.
- The Van Nuys News analyzed the content of local television news programming and found it wanting.

The list could go on, but it would by no means exhaust the possibilities for significant, distinctive investigative reporting at the community level. What rules do local employers follow in the hiring, promotion and compensation of women? How do teenagers spend their time? How do lawyers view ethics in their profession? Are sentencing and bail applied even-handedly to minority groups in local courts? Do male and female office-holders differ in their views of government? What factors account for the quality of life in a community, and how have they changed in the last year, in the last 10 years?

The last question points to an opportunity all newspapers share, but on which none has yet capitalized. Assessments of community progress are made occasionally, but they are usually unsystematic and subjective. Statistics on employment, building permits, population growth and the like give only a partial picture of community health. The availability of statistics in a number of areas of social and economic interest could be used to produce a quality-of-life model for the community. These statistics, called social indicators, are readily available measures that may reflect other, more general, community attributes. For example, the proportion of live births may reflect the general level of medical care in the community; garden nursery sales may show civic pride; voter turnout may indicate citizenship.

By developing a model of a dozen or more indicators, a newspaper may be able to provide its readers with an annual assessment of where the community is and where it's heading. Such a "psycho-social weather report" is entirely feasible, based on the state of the art today.

Twin Benefits from Training

The sample survey, the computer assisted analysis of records, the experiment—these are the "active" uses of precision journalism.

However, there are other, less obvious but perhaps more important justifications for developing staff capability in precision journalism. These can be described as "reactive" uses, and they apply to every reporter and copyreader on the staff.

As government, business and other institutions make wider use of research in their own activities, more of that material is finding its way to newspaper city desks. Reporters on every beat must regularly cope with quantitative data and conclusions. The congressman releases the results of his constituents' poll. The consultant hired by the transit commission presents the findings of a survey on bus utilization. The county attorney offers data on caseload and staffing. The chamber of commerce sends out a release on consumer shopping patterns.

These are based, supposedly, on scientific research and statistical analysis. If reporters and editors are to interpret the material adequately, if they are to protect their readers from shoddy research or questionable analysis, they themselves must be familiar with at least the language of research. A journalism class last year examined the news content of 10 daily newspapers on randomly chosen days for a period of two weeks.[2] Students found that 19 percent of the stories had a quantitative research base—they involved statistics or were based on scientific studies. If that kind of volume is confronting journalists in their daily work, numbers obviously are as important as words in the training of news personnel.

Getting Started in News Research

What can editors and publishers do to get involved sensibly in precision journalism? The cost, staff time and formal training required for research naturally make it easier for metropolitan newspapers to enter the field. But smaller news organizations can get started with a modest investment. A good starting point would be to check with nearby journalism schools to see if they have, or are willing to start, courses in precision journalism, research methods and statistics. Any school with a graduate program in journalism is likely to have faculty members competent to teach these subjects. The school may be induced to develop a short course or workshop in precision journalism, given sufficient interest and support.

Staff members also will benefit from reading one or two books on the subject, designed specifically for journalists. One is Meyer's *Precision Journalism*,[3] which provides a full introduction to the field. Another is the *Handbook of Reporting Methods*, by Maxwell McCombs, Donald Shaw and David Grey.[4] Written as a textbook, it offers an excellent introduction to both traditional and quantitative reporting techniques. Each book has extensive references to other useful materials on the subject.

Once the decision is made to train staff members, the next step is consideration of developing a physical system for projects. Many newspapers now have the computer capability to process data for surveys or records studies. If not, local colleges or research firms can provide that support, for a fee. While most newspapers keep data processing as an in-house function, they tend to farm out survey interviewing tasks to professional firms. Interviewing costs are high: 300-400 telephone interviews may run $1,500-$2,000, and face-to-face interviews as much as four times that much. That's one reason that telephone interviews have become the method of choice in field surveys. (However, one telephone technique, which uses recorded questions rather than live interviewers, is generally frowned upon by research authorities.)

Surveys are, of course, just one approach to a research objective. Some study objectives don't involve people or interviews but instead use documentary materials. These studies, known in social science as content analyses, also require careful design. As in surveys, sampling methods must be applied to assure an unbiased selection of records that will be representative of the whole. Experiments used to good effect in some precision journalism projects also have special design considerations.

To get the benefit of the "scientific" dimension of precision journalism, which implies validity and reliability, projects must be designed and executed according to accepted practice. This implies formal knowledge of research methods, something certainly within the reach of today's journalist.

Expertise is filtering into more newsrooms, and greater sophistication is evident in both active and reactive uses of precision journalism. With computers now as common as water coolers in most newspaper plants, the trend is likely to continue. ■

Footnotes

[1]Tankard, James W. Jr., "Public Opinion Polling by Newspapers in the Presidential Election Campaign of 1824." *Journalism Quarterly*, 49:2 (Summer 1972) 361-65.

[2]The study was conducted by a class at the University of Minnesota, supervised by the author. Newspapers included in the study were The New York Times, Chicago Tribune, Los Angeles Times, Minneapolis Star and Tribune, The Milwaukee Journal, The Washington Post and three small Minnesota dailies, the Worthington Globe, Waseca Journal and Rochester Post-Bulletin.

[3]Myer, Philip, *Precision Journalism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973.

[4]McCombs, Maxwell, Donald L. Shaw and David Grey, *Handbook of Reporting Methods*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1976.